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France Jails 2 In Odd Case Of Espionage

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PARIS, May 10 — A former French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer have been sentenced to six years in jail for spying for China after a two-day trial that traced a story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity.

A member of the French counter-espionage service said at the trial, which ended Tuesday, that the operation to collect information on France was carried out by a Chinese Communist Party intelligence unit that no longer exists.

The Chinese Government has denied any involvement in the case.

The case has been the talk of Paris lately, not so much because of the charge of spying itself as because of the circumstances. The case centered on a love affair between a young French diplomat, Bernard Boursicot, now 41 years old, who was stationed in Peking two decades ago, and a popular Chinese opera singer, Shi Peipu, 46.

Mr. Boursicot was accused of passing information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi, whom he believed for 20 years to be a woman.

Testimony in the trial indicated that the affair began in 1964 when Mr. Boursicot, then 20 years old, was posted at the French Embassy in Peking as an accountant. There he met Mr. Shi, a celebrated singer at the Peking Opera, where female roles have, according to tradition, often been played by men.

Mr. Shi was a well-known cultural figure in Peking and one of the few individuals allowed by the Chinese authorities to have contacts with foreigners.

Met at an Embassy Reception

According to testimony, Mr. Shi told Mr. Boursicot at a reception in the French Embassy in Peking that he was actually a woman.

A love affair between the two ensued to the point where, after several months, Mr. Shi told Mr. Boursicot that he was pregnant; later he announced to the apparently credulous Mr. Boursicot that he had had a son, Shi Dudu, that the diplomat had fathered.

Asked by the trial judge how he could have been so completely taken in, Mr. Boursicot said: "I was shattered to learn that he is a man, but my conviction remains unshakable that for me at that time he was really a woman and was the first love of my life. And then, there was the child that I saw, Shi Dudu. He looked like me."

Further explaining his sexual mis-identification of Mr. Shi, Mr. Boursicot said their meetings had been hasty affairs that always took place in the dark.

"He was very shy," Mr. Boursicot said. "I thought it was a Chinese custom."

Mr. Boursicot's espionage activities began in 1969, when he returned to Peking after a three-year absence. By then, China was at the height of the Cultural Revolution, and it was virtually impossible for foreigners to have personal relations with Chinese citizens.

A Request for Intelligence

Mr. Boursicot testified that a member of the Chinese secret service, whom he said he knew only as "Kang," approached him and said he could continue to see Mr. Shi if he provided intelligence information from the French Embassy. Mr. Boursicot apparently believed that if he refused to comply, Mr. Shi would be persecuted.

Mr. Boursicot was accused of having turned over some 150 documents to Shi Peipu, who passed them on to "Kang." Mr. Boursicot said at the trial that the materials were generally not sensitive and were publicly available.

Later, from 1977 to 1979, Mr. Boursicot was posted at the French Embassy in Ulan Bator in Mongolia, where one of his duties was to make a weekly trip to Peking with the diplomatic pouch. He said he made photocopies of the documents in the diplomatic pouch and turned them over to Mr. Shi.

The case was uncovered in 1983 when Mr. Shi, accompanied by his putative son, Shi Dudu, was allowed to leave China. He lived in Paris with Mr. Boursicot, who said he continued to believe that Mr. Shi was a woman.

The arrival of a Chinese citizen in the home of a former French diplomat attracted the attention of the French counterespionage service. When the French police questioned Mr. Boursicot about his relations with Mr. Shi, he disclosed his spying activities.